

## CHAPTER 2

# MY NAME IS ALICE:

## A FIFTH GRADE STORY OF NAMING AND FAMILY HISTORY

Alice Seletsky

My mother and father wanted my name to be part of their names. Their names were Neil and Diane. Since I was part of both of them, they wanted my name to be part of theirs. So they named me Nydia.

There are moments just before the start of school when I wish the children didn't have to show up. The room is ready, with everything perfectly in place. The red rug in the reading area has been shampooed and the striped cushion covers washed. The art area glistens with new paint brushes, unopened jars of paint, whole crayons, and 12 sharp scissors in the rack. Everything in the science area is folded, wound, packed, or boxed and neatly labeled. The book cabinets are freshly painted, and every book is in its proper place. The contact paper that covers some of the scarred table tops is smooth and unmarked. On the walls around the room, children's work is neatly mounted and artfully displayed. Who needs children in all this pristine splendor?

I feel that way about curriculum, too. I spend many hours of preparation, thinking up things for children to learn and do. I gather books, maps, pictures, and filmstrips. I make charts, lists, and video copies of interesting TV programs. I arrange museum visits and invite guest speakers. And along come the children, all 30 or 32 of them, with their own ideas, separate interests, and unique styles of thinking and working. The path of learning, mine as well as theirs, grows rocky. There are all kinds of unexpected bumps and ruts. We turn a corner and a whole new vista opens up. Some kids are leaping ahead; some are lagging, not getting it. There are times when everyone needs me and times when no one does. Like the classroom, which all too soon gets that lived-in look, the curriculum, too, takes on the character of the children who are refashioning it, with my support, into learning that grows out of and illuminates their lived experience. They are forming knowledge; that's what it's all about.

### Children Refashion the Curriculum

The 5th and 6th graders I teach are a lively, energetic group. The differences among them in age, cultural and economic background, academic strengths, special interests, and talents reflect the diversity we aim for in all the classes in

our school. Central Park East I, the primary school, and Central Park East Secondary School share a building in East Harlem, a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in Manhattan. Central Park East is a *public*, alternative school. Students come to us from many parts of the city, as well as from the school neighborhood, ensuring a broad heterogeneity. We accept students on a first-come, first-served basis, and selection is limited only by our effort to have an integrated student body made up of children of diverse racial, social, and economic backgrounds.

The curricula I write are intended for eleven- and twelve-year-olds, though the actual age range is wider than that since there are always a few younger children and others who are older because they have repeated a year. Many students know one another because our school is fairly small, and I come to know them well because they are with me for two years. Nevertheless, September begins with children who need to become a group, and a class that needs to become a community.

I like to begin the school year with a curriculum about names and naming and family histories. (On alternate years, I do autobiographies.) A colleague suggests that I call it a study rather than a curriculum, since it doesn't seem to have quite the weightiness and solemnity of a traditional curriculum. As a matter of fact, I intend it to be fun, though I hesitate to use the word 'fun' in the present climate of sober, no-frills education. Like others, I've been caught up in the spirit of the times and have to remind myself that "playing around" with ideas is every bit as important as facts and dates. So for the first eight weeks of school, we learn about what names mean to families, individuals, and whole societies through a curriculum that offers many points of access, many opportunities for children to share ideas and information, and that involves parents in the process of helping children form knowledge.

Students work on a variety of projects, in different media, and every child contributes to a collection of autobiographical pieces on how he/she came to have a particular name. These are typed, illustrated, duplicated, and shared with families and other classes in our school.

"Before I was born," Crystal wrote, "my mother's favorite singer was Crystal Gayle. So she said she would name her last child Crystal. When she looked it up in the name book, it meant 'bright and brilliant,' and that's just the kind of child she wanted. And that's what she got."

A little glitter and razzmatazz go a long way with children. I want them to be captivated from the moment they walk into the room. Clearly, the "schoolroom monastic" style of interior decoration that prevails in so many classrooms' drab walls, scarred furniture, the obligatory map or two, the notices about fire drills and school schedules won't do it. I'm inviting children to a feast of learning, and the room needs to declare itself as the place where it's all going to happen.

In some conspicuous place, often hanging from the overhead light fixtures, are the words 'What's in a Name?' in bright, bold, colorful letters. Equally conspicuous are names written on charts, displayed on walls: names of everyone in the class; ordinary names and unusual ones; names of historical figures, rock stars, favorite characters in books or films; names written in Armenian, Greek,

and Hebrew alphabets, and some in Cyrillic and Chinese characters cut from newspapers. There are signs which say "If Sandwich didn't invent the sandwich, who did?" or "What do Una, Primo, and Ichiko have in common?" Displayed on the interest table and in other parts of the room are writings and art work produced by students who have done this curriculum in earlier years and a variety of trade books about names and naming.

We start with a conversation about all this. Are any of the alphabets recognizable? Any of the names? Are there important ones I've left out? Why are names important? Why are we going to be learning about them?

### Family History

Family history is going to be part of the study, and we talk about what it is and how we're going to do it. To wind up the session, I read aloud from William Saroyan's *My Name Is Aram*. (Hearing stories read aloud and talking about them together is an especially important part of the shared experiences of the classroom, and I read to the children for about half an hour every day throughout the year.) Saroyan's book is a warm and funny evocation of childhood within a family that, in addition to its other marvelous qualities, has a wonderful collection of names. The fact that I'm Armenian, as Saroyan is, contributes another dimension to the reading. It gives me the opportunity to link some of my own family stories to his and add the spoken and written language as still another component. It makes it possible for some children to think about the importance of a family's native language and the role it plays in family life.

"My middle name is Yuvia (Lluvia)," wrote Mayra. "It means 'rain' in Spanish. Here is the story of how I got it. It was early May, and Texas was having a severe drought. The whole state was dry. Then all of a sudden, it started to rain. That's when I was born. Everyone who was indoors ran outside and started dancing. My mom thought it was good luck, so she named me Yuvia."

And, thinking of unusual names, David wrote, "My father wanted to name me after my mother's father, Hermengildo, and after his own father, Marcelo. My name would have been Hermengildo Marcelo. Wow!"

Why names? Because they are places of beginnings and origins, and ways to establish a common ground for everyone in the group. There are large clusters of ideas that I want children to explore, which go beyond the stories of their own names. What happens, for example, when one's name is taken away—the humiliation and dehumanization of concentration camps and prisons where numbers are substituted for names; how immigrants felt when they were given other names because their own were too difficult to pronounce; how children felt when they were told their family names had been changed.

"My family's original name was Schwartzright," Matt wrote, "but my grandpa and grandma changed it to Sherwin because Schwartzright is a Jewish name. At that time, Jews could not get work because people would tell them 'No Jews allowed.' They changed it to Sherwin, an English name, so they could get jobs."

We also discussed what happens when colonizing powers choose names for subjugated peoples, and how names and nationhood are reclaimed together at the time of independence. Another aspect of the topic is the history and development of language, since words are the names of things, and the roots of spoken language are evident in the process of naming.

### Exploring the Third World

I'm not suggesting that we cover all these topics in the course of our studies, but I need to keep such a range of subjects in mind when I plan because I'm never quite sure what direction the discussions will take, and where the children's interests will lead. Some years ago, a small group of students became interested in the names of newly independent countries of the third world. They began to explore the topic, and their enthusiasm was so contagious that many children followed their lead in comparing old maps and atlases with new ones, writing letters to embassies and UN missions, gathering information about how and why the new names were chosen.

Three or four times a week, we arrange the chairs in a circle and have a discussion about topics like these. The questions I raise are open-ended ones—What do you think was the very, very first name? Or, why do so many kids have the nickname 'Papo'? What I'm after here is speculation and hypothesizing, *what ifs* and *how comes*—playing around with ideas. The facts and dates, the specific information about theories of language formation, for example, naming rituals in primal societies, or social and cultural patterns of naming in various parts of the world will come later, usually in the form of short lectures that I deliver. I'm not especially knowledgeable about linguistics or philology, but the story of languages fascinates me. I tell it as well as I can, using my carefully prepared notes. I share those notes with the children sometimes and describe how I prepare them. I want them to know that knowledge isn't just there in my head, ready to pop out; I have to work at putting ideas together, just as they do.

I often use a process called reflection. I offer a word or an idea, and each student has to say one or two things about it, trying not to repeat what someone else has said. I make notes and summarize, restating what has been said and adding my own comments. (The process was developed by Patricia Carini and the staff of the Prospect Center for Education and Research in North Bennington, Vermont. It was not originally intended for use with children, but I have found it works very well.)

The following excerpts from my journal give the flavor of some of those conversations with my students:

Everything has to have a name, otherwise people would just be making noises to each other, and nobody would know what the noises meant. Every word is a name. Every word is the name of something, except words like 'the', 'and', 'it', and 'this'. Jahmal disagreed and said people use the word "this" instead of pointing, so it is the name of a gesture. Some people think every single word has a meaning, including every name. Others think some words and names are just sounds and don't mean anything. I said that in some languages, a certain kind of sound, "tsk," for example, has a special meaning, but only for people who know that language.

We talked about names that are family traditions. You get named after somebody in your family who is dead, and it's supposed to make you remember that person. But it doesn't always happen that way. Izzy says he's not sure his mother is thinking about his grandfather, who is dead, every time she says Izzy's name. Some people don't like their names, so they take a nickname. Or a baby brother or sister can start mispronouncing your name, and that can become your nickname.

The topic for another conversation was surnames—very common like Smith, Jones, Rivera, and more unusual ones like Bryszenski and Sriskandarajah. I read excerpts from Milton Meltzer's *A Book about Names* including the problems they had in China where 4800 women in a single district had exactly the same name. This led to interest in the number of Smiths and Joneses in New York. Children used telephone directories to gather data on numbers and types of names. We began to identify certain name endings like -sky, -ian, -son, and -ette as having particular national origins. We investigated the meanings of 'Van', 'Von', or 'De' and discussed the practice of hyphenating names. I gave many different homework assignments having to do with names in the phone book: the longest and the shortest, the one with the greatest number of consonants or vowels, names that name objects like Bean and Stone, names that name colors, names that describe work, and so on. I recorded one of these discussions in my journal:

Jamella came in with another funny name from the phone book: Goldie Fish. I told my story about the Lear family who named their daughters Chanda and Gonda and a millionaire named Gogg who named his daughters Irma and Yura. We talked about the kinds of names that never appear as surnames like Dog, Cat, Elephant—although somebody had Oliphant and said it was the same thing. Ashanti pointed out that some of those names are used among Native Americans and other tribal people; 'Black Elk' was the example he gave. Other children came up with other examples. Finally, someone brought up 'Roach' and refused to believe me when I pointed out that it was a perfectly good Anglo-Saxon name. Why would anybody use such a name, they asked; who would want to be called Roach? And are there any roaches in England? I said I'd look up the origins in the OED and report back.

The telephone directories were getting a workout, and I found myself giving a number of impromptu lessons on various aspects of alphabetizing. It appeared to be one of those skills which many kids had "learned," to the extent that they could put half a dozen words in alphabetical order if they had to, but they couldn't actually use the knowledge they had to locate particular names in the directory with any ease. As the children continued to compile lists, they began to identify many surnames of European origin, and began using Spanish, French, German, and Italian dictionaries to confirm guesses and check on meanings.

Active learning can't take place unless the classroom is arranged in ways that support children's choices and activities. In my room, work areas are designated and appropriately provisioned: art, clay, cooking, a reading corner with lots of books, science, math, computer, dress-up. Maps, globes, atlases, history books, and encyclopedias are in a special reference corner. For the past two years, I've had the use of an unused room adjacent to mine, and we've been able to spread out. Before that, I had an ordinary classroom of average size. All of it is just

as do-able in one room as in two; the latter is just so much more comfortable. One corner of the room, walled by two book cabinets, is my private domain. A beautifully lettered sign, arching over the narrow opening, announces it as "Elysian Fields." Before the year is out, most of the children come to know that it was the place where the dead heroes of Greek mythology ended up.

The projects that children work on are often, but not always, related to the curriculum theme. (Art for its own sake is every bit as important as art in the service of some other kind of learning.) Children work at mapmaking and model building, murals, sculpture, pottery, stitchery, illustrated books and written reports, board games, computer activities, graphs, charts, dioramas, improvised drama, reading—and anything else that seems appropriate. I regard these as an essential part of each day's work and expect children to take them seriously. In all the formal and informal evaluations that I make of children during the course of the year, I include some analysis and description of their work.

As the study of names got under way, children worked on sculpting their own names in clay in a variety of designs, and some enterprising youngster found bread dough to be the medium of choice and baked their names. In the sewing area, needlepoint and soft-sculpture were the media: names were worked into colorful designs on plastic mesh, or embroidered on fabric, then padded to stand out in relief. Another favorite was name pillows: fabric cut in the shape of individual alphabet letters, stitched and stuffed to form the name of the maker. Print-making was another medium that children used, making monoprints and colorgraphs of designs based on the letters and configurations of their names.

An activity that eventually included every child and resulted in a magnificent wall display was begun by the art teacher. She talked about flags and banners as another kind of symbolic name and helped children plan personal flags whose iconography was based on things important or special in each child's life. The completed pieces, done in water colors, oil, crayon, and felt marker were impressive because each so clearly reflected a particular child and, put side by side, gave a wonderfully fresh view of the whole group.

At our school, polls and surveys of various kinds of activities begin in the earliest grades. Small persons with clipboards appear from time to time, asking for permission to determine our preferences for particular colors, or animals, or flavors of ice cream; or we are asked to guess how many babies the hamsters will have this time around. The surveys that my 5th and 6th graders conducted in the course of this study of names were an extension of those early experiences in data collection. Using class registers, we tabulated the popularity of particular names and tried to make some inferences about cultural or national origins of the names—Latino, African, French, German, or others. Children interviewed friends in other classes about preferences, nicknames, and names that had special meanings for families.

Once the data were gathered, they had to be put in some kind of order to make sense of our findings. This became a laborious process, involving much shuffling of papers and making tally marks. It would have been a perfect way to use the computer as a research tool. Computer literacy is not my strong

suit. Neither is statistical analysis, but we got through it eventually, and the results, presented in the form of large charts, tables, pictographs, and bar graphs, all in living color, were wonderful to behold. Some of the children could describe the findings in written narrative form, but it was difficult for many others, including some who were reasonably fluent writers and speakers.

In my original plans, all these data were to have been combined with the children's individual reports and stories of how they were named into a comprehensive document. Each child would use it as the basis of a hand-bound, illustrated, personal book. My grand plan, it turned out, was a bit too grand for my resources and those of the class. Recopying graphs and tables to a reduced size, writing explanatory paragraphs for them, getting art work together all of the right size and shape, were activities for which nobody seemed to have much enthusiasm. The best we could manage, at the end of the study, was a simple collection of their stories and reports, typed by me, duplicated and stapled together in the form of a booklet.

Since each child was required to write one, I allowed considerable latitude in the scope and subject matter to be included in these reports. There was a broad range in ability among the children: some could write only the simplest kind of personal narrative, while others were ready for the more complex tasks of paraphrasing and interpreting information learned in interviews with parents and other family members, describing events and relationships, raising questions about tastes and preferences in naming. I wanted each contribution to represent the best that a particular child could do and for all the work to be equally valued by all the children.

We began with simple genealogical charts, lists of names and places of birth, names of siblings, and nicknames. Then children made similar charts for parents and grandparents after conducting interviews. Several wrote letters to grandparents or other family members who did not live nearby. Since parents were involved in helping children prepare the charts, bits and pieces of family history began to creep in: a child named after her mother's childhood friend; the objections of family members to particular names. "For the first two weeks of my life, my name was Jacob," Luke wrote. "My mom and dad loved the name Jacob, but everyone else in the family hated it, so they named me Lucas, after my great grandfather." Unusual names were noted, as well as places of origin. Using name labels and string, children transferred information about the birth-places of parents and grandparents to large maps of the United States and the world. These were continually interesting to the kids, as more and more names were added. They consulted them a lot, talked about it among themselves, and were very clear in their explanations to visitors.

The interview questions we agreed on were such queries as the following: How did I get my name? Why did you choose it? Did anyone else in the family have suggestions? How did others react when you told them what my name was? Some children tape-recorded their interviews, others took notes, sometimes with the help of parents. Everyone wrote an official first draft in class, which I read carefully at home. I try not to write too many things on children's papers. I'm not sure many of them know how to interpret abbreviated comments or suggestions for changes. Instead I keep a detailed set of notes for

myself and work with children individually on revisions of their work. For those who needed more time and attention than I was able to give, I enlisted the help of others—the special education teacher, our school librarian, school aides, and our student teacher. In some cases, I called home and asked parents to help, sharing my ideas and offering suggestions on how they might do it.

One of the reasons this study appeals to me so much is that it makes clear how we all have all sorts of common experiences that link us together. It is important for children to know that. As the stories and reports were written and shared, the common threads became clearer and clearer, so that children heard echoes of their stories in the stories of others.

"My mother picked Jahmal because she didn't want my name to be a European name. She wanted an African name. A couple of weeks before I was born, my mother and father went to a jazz concert. There was a jazz musician there called Ahmed Jahmal, and that's how I got my name."

Jamelah wrote on a similar theme: "My name is Arabic. My mother picked it out of an African book. I happen to like it a whole lot because it has that 'lah' in it, and it makes it sound sassy and musical. I like Johari [her middle name] too because it means jewel, and it makes me feel like a million bucks."

When the children read their work aloud to one another, there was another connection to Africa in Matthew's story that touched everyone:

When my mom and dad went on their honeymoon to Africa, they went around with the Peace Corps, to see if they wanted to join. When they came to a village, whose name I can't pronounce, they met a boy about 11 whom they came to like very much. His name was Usman. One day, he asked my parents if he could come to America with them. Since his parents were dead, and he worked on his uncle's farm, "Why not?" thought my parents. So they asked the chief, and he said no, because Usman was owned by his uncles. A few years later, my parents were in a restaurant where they met the Peace Corps leader, and they asked him how Usman was doing. He said that Usman had died of malaria. So when I was born, they gave me his name.

Over the years, I have done a variety of studies with my students. I am in the enviable position of being relatively free to choose my own themes and develop them in ways I deem appropriate and interesting for the children I teach. I think of this as a privilege and cherish it all the more because it is threatened. Citywide social studies tests are being talked of, and one of these days they will happen.

The topics I have chosen range from family history to ancient history, and from a study of imaginary lands and utopias to the recent history of Southeast Asia. We do short units of study on current affairs that we reenact in the classroom. A few years ago, when we were fortunate enough to have Chinese pen pals, we learned about modern China. I also have old favorites, which I return to every few years. Ancient Greek civilization is one of these. I revise it each time I do it to make a better fit with the particular group of children, but it remains essentially a humanities course—an amalgam of history, geography, literature, with myth, folklore, social history, art, and architecture as strands of varying importance.

I make these choices because one of my responsibilities as an educator is to make decisions about what is worth knowing and help children recognize that there are things in the world to be valued. I want them to understand what valuing means, how to express itself in our society, and how it is tied to what was valued in the past. I would like children to recognize the remarkable inventiveness of human beings and to think about what has happened to the ideas and artifacts produced by human imagination and effort.

I don't worry much about relevance or motivation; I try to write curriculum that offers many different ways of getting at ideas and many levels on which children can engage with them. I look to see what has attracted and caught the attention of a child as well as groups of children. In my secret heart, I always hope that something will arouse a passion for the subject that matches mine; on the rare occasions when it happens, it is a thrill unlike any other.

I find it difficult to think of children, content, and classroom as separate elements. What I teach is inextricably bound up with who the youngsters are in a particular group, and how they operate as learners in the classroom. I cannot think of curriculum as an abstraction or as prescriptions, goals, strategies, and outcomes. Though my *ideal* curriculum is a thing of breathtaking originality and seamless construction that would be utterly fascinating to every single child, reality is a little different. I am clear about what I want children to think about and learn, but the form of the curriculum is fluid and untidy—bits and pieces dribble off the edges, and there are little gaps that don't get filled up. Some threads of ideas meander here and there, but don't get very far.

I am not as uncomfortable with this as I once was. The knowledge we form in our heads—adults and children alike—is not a seamless fabric in which ideas are woven together into a fixed pattern and held tightly in place. It is more a matter of pieces of knowledge, some understood fully, some less so but with clear links, and whole clusters of notions that rattle around, looking for a place to fit in. Some are useful, some interesting, some mistaken. Part of the learning process is to be conscious of all this, to figure out what the useful parts are and how they can fit together so we can make some sensible interpretations of the world. Though there are many commonalities, each child puts ideas together in a different way and thinks the world differently from his or her neighbor. One of my purposes as a teacher is to help make children aware of this, to give them the tools to articulate the "world-in-the-head" and share it with others.

## CHAPTER 3

# HONOR THE EARTH: LEARNING FROM NATIVE AMERICANS\*

Mari DeRoche

**E**verybody needs a rock. Tim needs his to hold and feel the smoothness when he is having trouble sitting still in reading group. Nicole likes looking at her piece of pink quartz that she keeps on her desk. It reminds her of being in Maine with her father. That's where she picked it up and it became hers. Alison keeps her rock in her pocket and likes to make up stories about what it tells her.

Tara has a friend that happens to be a tree. She leans on it in all the seasons and "watches it live." Rae carries around an acorn because she likes "the way it fits right into my hand." These rock and tree lovers are my 3d grade students.

Sometimes a rock goes clattering across a desk, just when I'm presenting a new math concept. Once a desk cubby fell over spilling leaves and acorns all over the just-vacuumed floor. The custodian was there, telling me that I must do something about the growing sugar crystals that were attracting ants on the back counter.

At these times, I reach for my own smooth, round stone and remind myself that classroom silence and tidiness are desirable, but not more important than having students bring nature into the classroom.

I believe our planet is in danger. Toxic and nuclear wastes contaminate our water, land, and air. People are warring in the Persian Gulf and on the Los Angeles highways. People are starving and homeless in Ethiopia and in Hartford, Connecticut. Nuclear weapons threaten the existence of all life.

I think we can become better caretakers of the Earth and of people. Teachers can influence what will happen in the world in the next few decades. We can—and must—make a positive difference. I hope that by helping students form personal connections with the beauty of the Earth, they will take responsibility for making it a better place to live. *Honor the Earth, Learning from Native Americans* is a curriculum that I have developed to help my 3d grade students form these connections.

Charter Oak Neighborhood School in West Hartford is where I teach and learn. In our K-6, four-hundred-students population, many languages are spoken. About 50 students requiring intensive special education for a variety

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